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ABSTRACT

Analysis of different types of literature promotes cognitive development by giving students an opportunity to apply similar skills and strategies discussed in one genre--fiction, for example--to other genres like poetry, reports, descriptive pieces, and plays. The major intellectual function that each literary genre provides can be examined in terms of schema theory. In schools where writing is used as a means to promote clear thinking, it appears that reading a variety of literary genres has a related positive effect on writing. One genre that might be effective as a beginning point, and is particularly enjoyable for children, is folktales. Folktales are common in all countries, universal in nature. Through the use of a simple genre like the folktale, educators can help children understand that there are different types of literature. It is not necessary for children to define every piece of literature that they read, though the elementary school curriculum should provide a wide range of genres. (RS)

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Helping Children Understand Literary Genres

by Carl B. Smith

Our culture no longer views reading literature as simply its primary means for escape and adventure. It is now recognized that there is value in reading poems, plays, fiction, and humorous pieces, whether for enjoyment or for purposes of bibliotherapy (See Aiex, 1993). Literature should be an important part of any classroom reading program. This digest focuses on the different types of literature—literary genres—and particularly on the folktale.

The analysis of different types of literature promotes cognitive development because it gives students an opportunity to apply similar skills and strategies, such as identifying themes discussed in one genre—fiction, for example—to other genres like poetry, reports, descriptive pieces, and plays (Smith, 1991).

Schema Theory

The major intellectual function that each literary genre provides can be examined in terms of schema theory. Schema theorists assume that concepts are organized in our minds in groups that have an understandable network, at least understandable to the individual (Bartlett, 1932).

If we have no established schema for the content, structure, or function of a play, then we may be unable to apply thinking skills to compare characters and predict conclusions. We probably learned those skills in the context of reading short stories, but we may not recognize the opportunity to apply those same thinking skills when reading a play. Therefore each type of literature presented to a young reader serves two important functions: to develop a schema for the literary genre and to encourage the application of thinking skills in a variety of literary engagements (Smith, 1991).

Literature's Effect on Classroom Writing

In today's schools where writing is used as a means to promote clear thinking, it appears that reading a variety of literary genres has a related positive effect on writing. In a study of second graders, Eckhoff (1983) examined their writing after one group read a highly simplified textbook and another group read a text containing many literary forms. The children's compositions reflected the writing models in their texts. Students exposed regularly to various literary forms seemed better able to use different literary forms in their own writing. Eckhoff concluded that the students' writing was affected by their reading models and recommended that teachers provide students with a variety of literary models.

Folktales

One genre that might be effective as a beginning point, and is particularly enjoyable for children, is folktales. Folktales often start with real people, good guys and bad guys. As the exploits and the events of these people are told and retold, usually the original story is modified to make it more interesting or more humorous. That's the reason that many folktales present larger-than-life characters and very unusual happenings. As people told these tales around the fireside and in local cafes and restaurants, they became more eye-popping or side-splitting to impress the listening audience.

As the word "folktales" suggests, these are tales told by common people, not "litterateurs." They are spoken stories, not written ones. Now, of course, we may read folktales because they are collected in books, but their language remains folksy, talkable, perhaps regional. "Lake Wobegon Days" by Garrison Keillor is an example of a collection of regional tales whose appeal includes the local dialect of the Minnesotan Norwegian farmer. Most of the tales in the book were first told before an audience as part of Keillor's radio broadcasts on the "Prairie Home Companion." Most modern-day folktales now originate on radio or television.

Though the means of telling stories has shifted from family and neighborhood storytellers to radio and TV, the source of folktales remains constant—that is, the antics and the heroics of everyday life. The bizarre, frightening world of Charles Manson or the uplifting story of teacher Jaime Escalante are the stuff of folktales, now recounted on television for the entire world to see and hear. These two examples are typical of the purpose of many folktales, which is to caution or to

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motivate. Though many folktales are humorous accounts of the foibles of local people (for example, Randolph's "Pissin' in the Snow"), many were told to give children examples to ponder as they formed their moral philosophies.

Universality of Folktales

From the earliest times in America we have folktales that remind us of virtues and vices through the adventure of characters in our history. Most of us remember the "Courtship of Miles Standish," a story not unlike that of Edmond Rostand's French classic, *Cyrano de Bergerac*. Miles Standish was a middle-aged commander of the Plymouth Colony's small guard. Not feeling articulate enough to speak for himself, he sent a young, handsome friend, John Alden, in his stead, to speak of love to Priscilla Mullins. As it happens, Alden was also in love with the beautiful Priscilla. After John Alden's ardent speech in favor of his friend Miles Standish, Priscilla supposedly said: "Why don't you speak for yourself, John?" And guess who Priscilla married?

There are all kinds of practical lessons to be learned from the story of the courtship of Miles Standish. Miles lost because he did not speak for himself; John showed friendship, but might have lost his beloved had she not been bold enough to call the tune; Priscilla got the love she wanted because she had the wit and the courage to speak up.

Folktales are common in all countries, universal in nature. Since a folktale has been told by many storytellers, there are versions or variations for every country. Because it has been handed down through the ages, its origin is lost. "Cinderella" is perhaps the most universal of all folktales or fairy tales—nearly 1,000 versions have been documented (Mueller, 1984). English versions of many foreign tales are usually available in the school library and the public library.

As teachers, we want our students to realize that they can satisfy all kinds of emotional and intellectual needs through literature (Napier and Ali, 1992). There is a type of literature for every need, so to speak. Folktales provide a fairly clear and uncomplicated example of a type of literature. Just by reading several sample folktales and by analyzing their characteristics in discussions, even young children can arrive at a reasonable list of the characteristics of the folktale: it (1) involves real people or a typical situation; (2) uses unusual occurrences or humor to resolve an issue; (3) uses common spoken language; or (4) makes a point about life.

Through the use of a simple genre like the folktale, we can help children understand that there are different types of literature. The various types can be defined by looking at examples and then discussing the characteristics noted. At least in broad sweeps, students can begin to distinguish folktales, fairy tales, short realistic fiction, fantasy fiction, and nonfiction that ranges from personal essays to descriptions, analyses, explanations, humor, and so on.

A Range of Genres For Students

It is not necessary for children to define every piece of literature that they read, though the elementary school curriculum certainly should provide a wide range of genres. The range of types assures us not only of exposing students to the scope of materials available to them, but also of offering them the opportunity to feel the experiences of life through fantasy, poetry, and analysis.

Gradually, across the years in school, the array and the types of literature will unfold. Gradually, we hope, students will want to satisfy many of their emotional and intellectual needs through books—in all their variations. Gradually through the curriculum planning for the elementary and secondary schools, students will develop a knowledge of the many types of literature available to them for their various needs. As one scholar has pointed out: "In literary classrooms a variety of literature is available and shared. Picture books, folktales, chapter books, poetry, information books, and plays belong in every classroom, and children in literary classrooms have opportunities to read and respond to each genre" (Hade, 1991).

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